

*THE CRISIS OF
LITERATURE IN THE 1790s*

Print Culture and the Public Sphere

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CHAPTER ONE

The republic of letters

Never was a republic greater, better peopled, more free, or more glorious: it is spread on the face of the earth, and is composed of persons of every nation, of every rank, of every age, and of both sexes. They are intimately acquainted with every language, the dead as well as the living. To the cultivation of letters they join that of the arts; and the mechanics are also permitted to occupy a place. But their religion cannot boast of uniformity; and their manners, like those of every other republic, form a mixture of good and evil: they are sometimes enthusiastically pious, and sometimes insanely impious.

Isaac D'Israeli, 'The Republic Of Letters'

SPARKS OF TRUTH

In a review of Jean d'Alembert's *History of the French Academy*, in October 1789, the *Analytical Review* acknowledged the intellectual preeminence of the author, but rejected his arguments in favour of such academies. D'Alembert was, the review allowed,

a man distinguished in the most learned society in Europe by the universality and depth of his knowledge; by his proficiency in grammar, particular and universal, philology, metaphysics, history, the fine arts, and, above all, geometry. (5 (1789): 161)

D'Alembert's *History of the French Academy*, though, was written 'rather in the character of an apologist than that of a philosopher', biased by his personal position as the historian to the institution. In fact, the review suggests, the social advantages that d'Alembert attributes to 'academies, or literary societies, will be found, on reflection, to be the very strongest argument that can be brought against them' (163). Such societies may well act as a safeguard against 'licentiousness and extravagance', but at the price of

detering 'genius and invention' (ibid.). Only in the absence of so venerable an institution could intellectuals be expected to retain an integrity in their work that would have otherwise been constrained by the temptation to conformity that the presence of such an institution would inevitably exert. Indeed, one implication of the *Analytical Review's* suggestion that d'Alembert wrote in the character of an 'apologist' rather than that of a 'philosopher', that he was committed to defending something rather than discovering the truth about it, was that his *History* was evidence of this very point; d'Alembert's critical abilities had been influenced by his private connections with the Academy, his perceptions swayed by his personal obligations. Free of the influence of such an institution, the *Analytical Review* suggested, 'the *solitary student* . . . views things on a grander scale, and addresses his sentiments to a wider theatre: to all civilized and refined nations! To nations that are yet to rise, perhaps in endless succession, out of rudeness into refinement' (ibid.).¹

Not everyone shared this opinion. Isaac D'Israeli suggested that 'it is much to the dishonour of the national character' that 'no Academy, dedicated to the BELLES LETTRES, has ever been established'.² Those who agreed with D'Israeli insisted that such an academy would stand as a monument to the advanced state of British civilization, and would encourage the exertions of authors by the powers of public recognition which it would be able to bestow upon them. Nor, many implied, was the regulating effect of such an institution wholly undesirable; literature, like any human activity, was prone to excesses which detracted from its greater glory. The disciplinary function of such an institution, where it was properly exercised, would help to foster, rather than impede, the literary efforts of the nation. None the less, despite the enthusiasm of advocates such as D'Israeli, the *Analytical Review's* scepticism about the usefulness of academies was widely shared. It was informed by a belief in the different national spirit of Catholic France and Protestant England: the former characterized by too unquestioning a respect for dogmatic power, the latter blessed with a love of liberty. Linda Colley notes that these perceptions were strengthened by the long series of wars fought between England and France throughout the century. The British 'defined themselves as Protestants struggling for survival against . . . the

French as they imagined them to be, superstitious, militarist, decadent and unfree.³

Because of the perceived connection between liberty and knowledge, the debate about academies reflected a series of distinct but overlapping views about what the *Monthly Review* described as 'that grand palladium of British liberty, THE FREEDOM OF THE PRESS' (17 (1791): 121). Print was for many both an index and a guarantee of freedom – one of the glories of an advanced civilization and an important means of opposing arbitrary authority. Arthur O'Connor insisted that the invention of the compass and the printing press had determined the course of history in a direction which Pitt's repressive measures were powerless to halt unless he was prepared to 'consign every book to the flames' and 'obliterate the press'.⁴ An anonymous pamphlet entitled *TEN MINUTES ADVICE TO THE PEOPLE OF ENGLAND, On the two Slavery-Bills Intended to be brought into Parliament the Present Session* (1795), agreed that 'whenever a tyrant wishes to abandon himself to the lust of dominion, his first step is to reduce and degrade his subjects to a state of ignorance . . . by cutting off that social intercourse, and unrestrained exchange of opinions, from which all knowledge, all information is derived, and from whence flows the consciousness of dignity, and the rank of human nature' (6).

As the political divide widened at the end of the century, a belief in the centrality of print culture to British liberty remained one point on which – however differently they might interpret it – opposed critics could still find some measure of common ground. The unparalleled social, economic, and political advantages which were seen to be enjoyed by the current generation, and the unprecedented productivity of authors in all fields of literary endeavour, were hailed by critics from various political perspectives as proof of the equation between print and the public good.

Janet Todd is right in noting the extent to which celebrations of the quasi-political authority of the reading public anticipate Percy Shelley's emphasis on poets as unacknowledged legislators.⁵ Marilyn Butler similarly describes this growing interest in current issues as an 'informal Congress of the educated classes' – a shadow government of enlightened public opinion which would have no formal role within the political process, and no direct influence, but which no responsible government would wish to, or could even

hope to, oppose.⁶ In his unsuccessful but highly publicized defence of Thomas Paine for *Rights of Man*, part 2, Thomas Erskine offered a stridently reformist version of precisely this proposal: 'government, in *its own estimation*, has been *at all times* a system of perfection; but a free press has examined and detected its errors, and the people have from time to time reformed them. – This freedom has alone made our government what it is; this freedom alone can preserve it'. 'Other liberties', he continued later in the same trial, 'are held *under governments*, but the liberty of opinion keeps GOVERNMENTS THEMSELVES in due subjection to their duties'.⁷ The *Analytical Review* insisted in similar terms that '[l]iterature, by enlightening the understanding, and uniting the sentiments and views of men and of nations, forms a concert of wills, and a concurrence of action too powerful for the armies of tyrants' (2 (1788): 324–5). As Thomas Holcroft more succinctly put it in his novel *Hugh Trevor* (1797), the 'nation that remarks, discusses, and complains of its wrongs, will finally have them redressed' (364).⁸

William Godwin presented a classic version of this reformist argument in a section entitled 'Literature' in his *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793):

Few engines can be more powerful, and at the same time more salutary in their tendency, than literature. Without enquiring for the present into the cause of this phenomenon, it is sufficiently evident in fact, that the human mind is strongly infected with prejudice and mistake. The various opinions prevailing in different countries and among different classes of men upon the same subject, are almost innumerable; and yet of all these opinions only one can be true. Now the effectual way for extirpating these prejudices and mistakes seems to be literature.⁹

Godwin's description of literature as an engine may sit a bit uncomfortably with our own age's more aesthetically based assumptions, but it reflects the practical side of late eighteenth-century middle-class culture. For many authors, but for political dissenters especially, the question of what you could do with literature was more important than the question of what belonged to it. Literature was valuable because, as an engine, it was both a means of facilitating debate between an unlimited number of participants, and a vehicle for spreading the lessons which emerged from those debates throughout a growing reading public. What was vital was that literature remain characterized by a wide-range of exchanges *between* different authors, rather than merely

a means of reporting the isolated discoveries of unconnected individuals:

[I]f there be such a thing as truth, it must infallibly be struck out by the collision of mind with mind. The restless activity of intellect will for a time be fertile in paradox and error; but these will be only diurnals, while the truths that occasionally spring up, like sturdy plants, will defy the rigour of season and climate. In proportion as one reasoner compares his deductions with those of another, the weak places of his argument will be detected, the principles he too hastily adopted will be overthrown, and the judgements, in which his mind was exposed to no sinister influence, will be confirmed. All that is requisite in these discussions is unlimited speculation, and a sufficient variety of systems and opinions. (15)

Such a vision synthesized a recognition of the paramount importance of private judgement with the Humean ideal of sociability. People would decide their opinions for themselves, but they would do so as members of a community dedicated to intellectual exchange. In *Godwin's Political Justice*, Mark Philp suggests that this perspective emerged out of Godwin's own immersion within a literary community that 'lived in a round of debate and discussion, in clubs, associations, debating societies, salons, taverns, coffee houses, bookshops, publishing houses and in the street . . . conversation ranged through philosophy, morality, religion, literature, and poetry, to the political events of the day' (127). Our impressions of the period may have traditionally focused on the charismatic image of the Romantic outcast, but as Philp notes, '[t]hese men and women' who dominated the late eighteenth-century literary scene 'were not the isolated heroes and heroines of Romanticism pursuing a lonely course of discovery; they were people who worked out their ideas in company and who articulated the aspirations and fears of their social group' (127).

Godwin's position may have balanced the energies of private judgement against the constraints of social exchange, but it remained a potentially anarchical vision, as we will see below. It licensed an endless number of authors to engage in an endless series of debates on every imaginable subject, including politics, guided only by the decisive force of something known as reason. But Godwin insisted that unchecked debate ultimately led to social cohesion rather than dissension by developing widely shared standards of opinion amongst the reading public:

Literature has reconciled the whole thinking world respecting the great principles of the system of the universe, and extirpated upon this subject the dreams of romance and the dogmas of superstition. Literature has unfolded the nature of the human mind, and Locke and others have established certain maxims respecting man, as Newton has done respecting matter, that are generally admitted for unquestionable. (III, 15)

Behind the anarchic spectre of apparently random intellectual collisions lay the reassuring teleology of the gradual progress of truth – a force which, because it was both unifying and liberating, was ultimately the strongest ally of sound government.

Godwin's ideas about literature as an overtly political communicative domain represented an extreme version of a set of beliefs that had been evolving over the previous centuries. In her study of the republic of letters in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Anne Goldgar notes that the 'term first appeared in its Latin form in the fifteenth century and was used increasingly in the sixteenth and seventeenth, so that by the end of that century it featured in the titles of several important literary journals'.¹⁰ Lacking any official regulations or geographic territory, the identity of this community was consolidated by those modes of affiliation – exchanges of books, visits, and letters of introduction – which evoked an ethos of cooperation between its members. Their goal may have been the pursuit of knowledge, but scholars were expected to pursue this ambition in a virtuous and disinterested manner guided by a paramount concern for the republic of letters itself.

The late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century republic of letters was always implicitly political because it was part of a broader hegemonic shift toward the middle class. But Goldgar distinguishes between the literary republics at the end of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (which she identifies as the *érudit* and *philosophe* republics of letters) primarily in terms of political orientation. The focus of late seventeenth-century scholars was inward; the public which they cared about was each other. 'Although the increase of knowledge was an avowed goal . . . the benefit of the larger society was not a major concern.'¹¹ Their Enlightenment heirs, however, celebrated knowledge as power, believing that they could use it to change the world by encouraging political reform in the public sphere, and moral reform in the private. It is in terms of this growing sense of a wider social obli-

gation that we must locate Dena Goodman's description of the 'seriousness of purpose' of the Enlightenment republic of letters.¹²

This redefinition of the republic of letters in terms of its relations to its wider social context was reinforced by the increasingly commercial nature of British society. In their studies of different aspects of mid eighteenth-century literary culture, critics such as Jerome Christensen and Frank Donoghue identify the sophisticated nature of the book trade as a key reason for the erosion of the insularity of the older *respublica literaria*. Authors' perception of their work as property forced them to negotiate a complex array of pressures and opportunities which brought them into closer contact with a widening reading public that was no longer composed solely of other authors. The effects of these developments were double-edged. They reinforced authors' location within a much wider nexus of relations that included publishers and readers, but at the same, they could also alienate authors from their readers by immersing them within a bewildering network of impersonal exchanges that substituted financial reward for the earlier spirit of mutuality. But whether these commercial developments were viewed positively or negatively, observers agreed that like the growing campaign for political reform, they had transformed the republic of letters in a fundamental way.¹³

Jurgen Habermas traces this shift in authors' primary concerns in terms of the changing meaning of the word 'publicity' from the earlier feudal sense of the stylized 'aura' of the aristocrat to the rise of the more modern sense of publicity as a cultural domain 'whose decisive mark was the published word'. Building on the traffic in news that was established along early trade routes, territorial rulers mobilized the press as an important organ of public authority. Eventually, however, the absolutist government of the mercantile state 'provoked the critical judgement of a public making use of its reason'. Reversing its originally hegemonic role, the public sphere of the printed word 'was now casting itself loose as a forum in which the private people, come together to form a public, readied themselves to compel public authority to legitimate itself before public opinion'.¹⁴

Habermas's account of this historical shift in the meaning of the word 'publicity' from aristocratic aura to communicative process is analogous to Michel Foucault's sense of a shift from an earlier

epoch in which power functioned by displaying itself in rituals such as public executions to a disciplinary form of power – symbolized by Jeremy Bentham's plans for a panopticon – which reversed this dynamic by emphasizing the visibility of the subjects rather than the rulers. Whereas Foucault's sense of this historical shift is pessimistic (modern life as a prison), Habermas emphasizes the liberating aspects of this version of publicity in which political subjects 'were to think their own thoughts, directed against the authorities'.¹⁵

Importantly, however, Habermas also stresses that the public sphere was in no way reducible to the literary sphere. The literary sphere was important as a means of fostering a process of 'self-clarification' which enabled a community of private individuals to recognize themselves as a public. This domain included both the actual practice of letter writing, through which 'the individual unfolded himself in his subjectivity', and the fictional counterpart of this practice, the epistolary novel. Although the political public sphere was constituted through this process of self-discovery, it was rooted in a wide array of formal and informal practices and modes of association that went far beyond the literary sphere.¹⁶ These included various forms of local government and other civic institutions, such as hospitals and charity organizations, theatres, museums, and concert halls, learned and philanthropic societies, organized debating societies and meeting places, such as coffee houses, where the latest news could be discussed. Print culture was only one aspect of a complex array of social relations enabling critical discussion.

As the reform movement in Britain accelerated in the 1780s and 1790s, however, critics attributed an increasingly political role to literature that went far beyond the subjective and therefore private task of facilitating a process of self-interpretation: it was the single most effective means by which people could engage each other in a rational debate whose authority all governments would be compelled to recognize. In this more political guise, literature functioned as a kind of group project where the goal was to project the interests of the group so clearly onto the public consciousness that relations of power would give way to questions of morality.

Political Justice may have been notorious amongst critics who saw little reason for enthusiasm in the growing restlessness for reform, but amongst its advocates, Godwin's ideas about the role of litera-

ture were far from unique. Reformers were united by their sense of the contradiction between the closed system of formal politics and the liberating force of a free press as an enabling dialectic fostering a growing critique of the hegemonic order. And they were convinced that history was on their side. The *Analytical Review* shared Godwin's interfusion of pessimism and optimism about current social conditions, a blend which guaranteed the heroic role of literature (and authors) as an 'engine' capable of alleviating oppression:

To dispel those clouds of ignorance, and to disperse that mass of error, which have hitherto been so baneful to society, ought to be the first business of enlightened minds. It is only by giving men rational ideas of the nature of society, and of the duties and interests of human beings, that the obstacles to the progress of human happiness are to be removed. When such ideas are thoroughly disseminated, reason will soon triumph over tyranny without external violence, and under the auspices of freedom general prosperity will arise.

Towards the accomplishment of this great end the labours of many eminent writers have, of late years, been directed. Their works have been sought with avidity, and read with attention; and the influence of their speculations has already been visible in the active spirit of inquiry, which has been excited amongst all ranks of men. (22 (1795): 545)

Paying tribute to the same process, Mary Hays insisted that the gradual pace of the dawning of truth was a sign of strength rather than weakness. Human faculties, enfeebled by the continued effects of prejudice, could not immediately adapt themselves to 'the sudden splendour' of the full force of these 'just and liberal notions'.¹⁷ The magnitude of these transformations did not make them seem any less inevitable though. The *Monthly Review* allowed, in their account of an English translation of Volney's *Ruins*, that the arrival of a new era 'when the whole race will form one great society' was not 'speedily to be expected'. But the undeniable fact was that 'even now . . . a new age opens; an age of astonishment to vulgar souls, of surprize and fear to tyrants, of freedom to a great people, and of hope to all the world' (6 (1791): 553). In *The Proper Objects of Education* (1791), which was originally given as a talk at the Dissenters' Meeting Hall at the Old Jewry, Joseph Priestley agreed that '[i]n science, in arts, in government, in morals, and in religion, much is to be done . . . but few . . . are able, and at the same time willing, to do it' (2). But like his reformist

contemporaries, Priestley insisted that the 'times are fully ripe for . . . reformation' (23), and mocked those who resisted the inevitable dawning of truth:

The late writings in favour of liberty, civil and religious, have been like a beam of light suddenly thrown among owls, bats, or moles, who, incapable of receiving any pleasure or benefit from it, can only cry out, and hide themselves, when the light approaches, and disturbs them. But may this light increase, and let all who are offended by it retire into whatever holes they think proper. (36–7)

By juxtaposing the enormity of entrenched prejudice with the 'sure operation of increasing light and knowledge', reformers implied that the conservatives' greatest error was their inability to see the futility of clinging to inherited traditions as the primary guide to future progress. 'Can ye not discern the signs of the times?' asked Anna Barbauld.¹⁸ By transforming the dynamics of the current age into a semiotics writ large, Barbauld converted history itself into a text in the precise image of the reformist dream of publicity: universally available and potentially educational.

Many reformers also shared Godwin's more particular emphasis on the role of literature in promoting 'the collision of mind with mind', rather than simply communicating the epiphanies of inspired individuals – or what amounted to the same thing, unexamined ideas – to the reading public. The *Monthly Review*, which celebrated Priestley as someone who, 'by a sort of collision, strike[s] from reluctant minds some sparks of truth' (5 (1791): 303), offered its own pages as a place where these sorts of exchanges might find a home: 'As discussion is that collision of minds by which the sparks of truth are often excited, we are always desirous of promoting the operation of this mental flint and steel, provided it be used with politeness and good temper' (33 (1800): 371). Mary Hays argued that 'the truth must . . . like the pure gold, come out uninjured from a trial by fire, which can consume only the dross that obscured its lustre'.¹⁹ Intellectual investigations must themselves be open to an unrestricted process of investigation in order that their assumptions might be tested, and their positive contributions extracted. What was not truth was intellectual dross, which would be consumed by those exchanges out of which truth would ultimately emerge.

What remained constant for the advocates of this vision was the

connection between the ideal of liberty and the improving powers of what Mary Wollstonecraft called the 'rapidly multiplied copies of the productions of genius and compilations of learning, bringing them within the reach of all ranks of men'.²⁰ Exchanges in print might lead to new ideas, but literature's role as a means of producing new forms of knowledge needed to be balanced against its other function as a medium for the diffusion of these ideas throughout society. Using the example of Russia, the *Monthly Review* warned that where the various fields of learning did not become 'naturalized to the soil . . . of national culture', they existed in a state which resembled 'a greenhouse, in which exotics are kept alive by artificial warmth . . . In such circumstances, they certainly do honour to the liberality and taste of those who are at the expence of preserving them: but they are of little service in adorning and fertilizing the country' (4 (1791): 481).

Godwin's insistence that unrestricted discussion was the surest guarantee of liberty was reinforced by the conviction of many reformist authors that vice was a result of ignorance. Properly educated, even the most hardened criminal would recognize that his true interests lay in obeying the laws of his society. Catherine Macaulay argued that '[t]here is not a wretch who ends his miserable being on a wheel, as the forfeit of his offences against society, who may not throw the whole blame of his misdemeanours on his education'.²¹ William Wordsworth's and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's emphasis on the capacity of reading to make us more fully human through the exercise of the imagination finds its Enlightenment antecedent in the stress on education as a basis of individual and social reform. By fusing personal virtue and political liberty in a single redemptive process, reformers were able to counter the conservative argument that genuine political reform was impossible without a prior reform in the character of the people themselves. In its review of Godwin's *Political Justice*, the *Monthly Review* insisted that because 'individual and general ignorance' was the source of 'all the oppression that exists among mankind . . . A general diffusion of knowledge [was] the only remedy for these evils' (9 (1793): 311). This diffusion of knowledge was frequently equated with the development of a set of rational standards of opinion within and even between nations – a unanimity that was not necessarily ever fully achieved but which was understood to exist none the less as a kind of vanishing point to which all debates

were inescapably destined. Those who dissented from this optimistic position were owls, bats, or moles, who were free to scurry into whatever dark recesses they could find.

However amorphous this sense of inexorable historical progress may have been, these developments were recognized as being singularly dependent on technical advances in the print industry.²² In *Letters on Education* (1790), Catherine Macaulay argued that the 'advantages of printing, by rendering easy the communication of ideas, giving an universality to their extent, and a permanence to their existence, will ever be found a sufficient remedy against those evils which all societies have experienced from the superstitions of the weak, and the imposing craft of the subtle' (323). Thomas Holcroft placed a similar emphasis on 'the art of printing' in the defence of this progressivist vision of history which his protagonist makes to the cynic Stradling in *Hugh Trevor* (1797):

When knowledge was locked up in Egyptian temples, or secreted by Indian Brahmins for their own selfish traffic, it was indeed difficult to increase this imaginary circle of yours: but no sooner was it diffused among mankind, by the discovery of the alphabet, than, in a short period, it was succeeded by the wonders of Greece and Rome. And now, that its circulation is facilitated in so incalculable a degree, who shall be daring enough to assert his puny standard is the measure of all possible futurity? (352)

Holcroft's account of Western culture, from the wonders of Greece and Rome to the final glimpse of utopian futurity, is structured by its juxtaposition of Western traditions with Egyptian and Indian tyranny. But it is also informed by a teleology that bridges two historical epochs characterized by two different types of print in an irreversible march of social progress. From printing as a signifying system capable of reproduction to print as the mechanized basis of that reproduction, technical advances in the art of written communication foster democratic advances as a direct result of the dissemination of knowledge. D'Israeli was less confident of the effects of 'the invention of Printing', but he none the less acknowledged that it was fundamentally reshaping society by diffusing new ideas throughout a growing reading public which included 'those whose occupations had otherwise never permitted them to judge on literary compositions'.²³

The printing press made it possible to produce large editions relatively cheaply and quickly, but the virtual space of the public

sphere which this created remained dependent on a growing network of lending libraries, reading rooms, reading societies, coffee houses, debating societies, and on the beginnings of a national postal system efficient enough to facilitate the circulation of books, newspapers, and pamphlets.²⁴ This infrastructure spanned the major cities and the provincial towns, and embraced, in varying degrees, both the polite and the poorer classes.²⁵ Richard Altick notes that the more exclusive libraries, which charged fees and were often attached to the 'literary and philosophical societies' which sprang up in the larger towns, were complemented by numerous book clubs composed of members who banded together to share the cost of books, and by the commercial libraries which lent popular literature (generally novels) at accessible prices. Altick's warning against overestimating the extent of the diffusion of reading beneath the level of artisans and small shopkeepers is probably true for those areas of literature whose price and length limited their accessibility.²⁶ But it overlooks the enormous eighteenth-century demand for chapbooks, as well as for newspapers, which by the 1790s carried extensive reports of parliamentary proceedings.²⁷ It also underestimates the effects of those formal and informal associations and practices which helped to extend the privileges of print culture amongst the lower orders.

The provision made in the Pitt government's 1789 bill to increase the stamp tax against hiring out newspapers for a minimal charge suggests a nervous awareness by the government of a potentially large body of working-class readers.²⁸ The tradition of tavern debating, especially in London, made it possible for anyone who could afford the sixpence fee to be a part of the same exchange of ideas about current topics that was identified by many as the most important function of literature.²⁹ Whatever their more political concerns, the Sunday night meetings of the London Corresponding Society offered members of this class a chance to participate in reading and discussion groups.³⁰ These expansionary dynamics reinforced links between literate and non-literate social groups, who were able to hear pamphlets and newspapers read aloud in the taverns. All of these factors reinforce Stuart Curran's observation that 'the sense that history was being made, or remade, on a world scale was universal; so was the recognition that it did not actually occur until it happened in print'.³¹

This ideal of literature as a public sphere was universalizing in

the claims that were made for it, but this did not, of course, mean that it was universally embraced. It was generally associated with the reformist middle class, and particularly with Dissenters such as Richard Price, Gilbert Wakefield, George Dyer, Godwin, Priestley (praised by the *Analytical Review* – which was in turn published by another famous Dissenter, Joseph Johnson – for possessing ‘a mind unincumbered with the shackles of authority, richly stored with knowledge, long exercised in liberal speculation, and . . . superior to artifice and disguise’ (9 (1791): 52–3)), Helen Maria Williams, Anna Barbauld, and Hays.³² Kramnick notes that because large numbers of English Dissenters had emigrated to the America, those ‘who remained in England constituted about 7 percent of the population. But those 7 percent . . . were at the heart of the progressive and innovative nexus that linked scientific, political, cultural, and industrial radicalism’.³³ Rational Dissenters and their beliefs, values, and language permeated the non-establishment literary and social circles of the day, and had considerable influence over a wide area of printing and publishing. They ‘resorted to literature and publishing as sources of income because many other professions were denied to them by the Tests’.³⁴

Debarred from politics by their faith, and in the case of Williams, Barbauld, and Hays, by their sex as well, Dissenters discovered in literary achievements both a form of self-legitimation and a vehicle for promoting political change. They could establish their credentials as citizens fit to participate in the political sphere by demonstrating their abilities and their integrity within the literary republic. In doing so, they frequently contrasted the moral worth of ‘the peaceful walks of speculation’ with ‘the crooked and dangerous labyrinths of modern statesmen and politicians’.³⁵ In *An Address to the Opposers of the Repeal of the Corporation and Test Acts* (1790), Barbauld turned political loss to strategic advantage by comparing the selfless integrity of literature with the corruption of formal politics:

You have set a mark of separation upon us, and it is not in our power to take it off, but it is in our power to determine whether it shall be a disgraceful stigma or an honourable distinction . . . If, by our attention to literature, and that ardent love of liberty which you are pretty ready to allow us, we deserve esteem, we shall enjoy it . . . If your restraints operate towards keeping us in that middle rank of life where industry

and virtue most abound, we shall have the honour to count ourselves among that class of the community which has ever been the source of manners, of population and of wealth. (22–3)

For many observers, these differences between the industrious and virtuous middle classes and the indolent aristocracy were reflected in the different approaches of the educational institutions attended by their sons. Whereas a foreign visitor to Oxford was reportedly amazed by a degree examination in which ‘the Examiner, candidate, and others concerned passed the statutory time in perfect quiet reading novels and other entertaining works’, Dissenting academies such as Warrington, Exeter, Hackney, and Manchester were widely popular with the prosperous middle class for their efforts to offer a more practical and thorough education which included large components of the natural and applied sciences, philosophy, theology, and politics. In his *Letter to the Right Honourable William Pitt on the Subject of Toleration and Church Establishment* (1787), Priestley argued that ‘[w]hile your universities resemble pools of stagnant water secured by dams and mounds, and offensive to the neighbourhood, ours are like rivers, which, while taking their natural course, fertilize a whole country’ (20). Priestley pioneered the study of history and geography at a university level while teaching at Warrington, and – after being driven from Birmingham by the riots of July 1791 – gave free lectures in chemistry and history at Manchester, where the student body included William Hazlitt from 1793 to 1795.

Importantly, Dissenting academies held their lectures in English rather than Latin, drawing on a range of English sources which were more easily and rapidly consulted, and more modern in their range of thought. Gauri Viswanathan has argued that English Studies were first formally implemented in India in the early nineteenth century. It is not disagreeing with this to add, as McLachlan and Robert Crawford do, that the informal roots of English studies lie in those programmes of polite literature or *belles lettres* which were frequently taught in Britain’s social and geographical margins – the Scottish universities and the ‘provincial, northern, non-metropolitan’ settings of many of the academies.³⁶ It is in these political and institutional terms that we must read Peter Hohendahl’s argument that ‘[l]iterature served the emancipation movement of the middle class as an instrument

to gain self-esteem and to articulate its human demands against the absolutist state and the hierarchical society'.³⁷

However coherent it may have seemed as a result of its adversarial status though, the reform movement remained a heterogeneous social body divided along lines of class as well as gender. In his analysis of the role of theory in the political developments of the period, David Simpson argues that

for Tom Paine and his followers, as for their Enlightenment precursors, rational method was a liberating and demystifying energy, a way beyond the illusions of social, political, and religious conventions, which it exposed as just that: illusions . . . [T]he naturally reasonable mind had only to be shown the truth for the truth to spread and prevail.³⁸

The political aspirations of radical reformers such as Paine and the leaders of the London Corresponding Society overlapped with the professional ambitions of middle-class authors who were equally intent on mobilizing these ideas in order to legitimize their own reformist ambitions. Instead of either conflating these two groups or seeing them as wholly distinct, it is more important to view them as internally differentiated and multiply overlapping social constituencies, whose shared ideas about the role of literature led to a strategic entanglement and a mutual nervousness about the nature of their alliance in the polarized atmosphere of the mid-1790s.³⁹ Maintaining this focus on the heterogeneity of the reform movement, and remembering the points of commonality between many middle-class reformers and conservatives, usefully complicates the oppositional vision which structures approaches such as Olivia Smith's none the less valuable *The Politics of Language, 1791–1819*. As Isaac Kramnick puts it, '[i]n the last half of the eighteenth century . . . we find antagonistic interests and conflicting ideologies that require more than the dichotomy of plebeian and patrician'.⁴⁰ Kramnick situates his argument in opposition to what he describes as E. P. Thompson's more polarized view, but in 'Eighteenth-Century English Society: Class Struggle Without Class?' Thompson argues in strikingly similar terms that 'when the ideological break with paternalism came, in the 1790s, it came in the first place less from the plebeian culture than from the intellectual culture of the Dissenting middle class, and from thence it was carried to the urban artisans' (163–4).

By tracing both the complex and often controversial relations

between these elements of the reform movement, and their various points of opposition and collusion with their mutual opponents, for whom the word 'reform' became increasingly intolerable, I want to develop a more intricate understanding of the sorts of claims that were being made on 'literature' in the period. Emergent or developing ideas about the nature of literature were shaped by both the areas of overlap and the differences between these various elements of the political struggles in the period. Conservative authors and journals were in many ways sympathetic to ideas about literature as an engine of progress. At times, this was because the rhetoric of 'improvement' was too compelling to be seen to despise; elsewhere, it was because this spirit of improvement included priorities which conservative authors genuinely embraced. A correspondent to the *Gentleman's Magazine*, a periodical which was no friend to the sorts of political reforms advocated by the likes of Godwin, Priestley, Wollstonecraft, or Hays, none the less proudly cited this diffusion of learning as a source of national pride: 'Knowledge, which was long confined to few, is now universally diffused, and is not lost in empty speculation, but operates upon the heart, and stimulates more active and new modes of benevolence' (58 (1788): 214). The *Gentleman's* stressed, though without the political emphasis of these Enlightenment reformers, a similar sense of the need for this diffusion of learning throughout society:

To what end was the learning of a few whilst it was confined to a few? Moroseness and pedantry. To what end was the Gospel, whilst its moralities were veiled by pomp or mysticism? Superstition or hypocrisy. They are now universally disseminated for the happiness of all. And we have now in our power more genuine felicity than was ever known at any former period. (61 (1791): 820)

The *British Critic* could similarly announce that '[e]very publication which tends to the abridgement of labour, and the promotion of accuracy, must be acceptable to the literary world' (it gave the particular example of logarithms), but it was unlikely to endorse the sorts of connections between literature and the cause of political reform espoused by liberal and radical authors (3 (1794): 1). The progressive power of literature was, as we have seen, frequently associated with the cause of political liberty, but again, the interpretation of this relationship depended heavily on whether liberty was understood to refer to the present state of

society, and so to achievements that lay in the past, or to the goal of transforming present conditions, guided by a vision of a better future.

Conservative critics took pride in the fact 'that, in almost every branch of science and literature, the industry and abilities of our countrymen have rendered themselves conspicuous' (*BC* 4 (1794): 417). Nor were they unwilling to advocate the freedom of the press. The *Gentleman's* allowed, in a hostile review of Thelwall's *Rights of Nature*, that the republic of letters was a sphere within which '[e]very member. . . however obscure, possesses the most unbounded right to discuss with perfect freedom the opinions and reasoning of every other' (67 (1797): 55). The *British Critic* offered its own cautious endorsement of the political importance of 'an ample publication of authentic documents to convey correct information' in the context of its support for the dissemination of conservative pamphlets (2 (1793): 152). Freedom of the press was too important a touchstone of English liberty to be seen to oppose. It was more effective to try to beat the radicals at their own game, as Hannah More did with her *Cheap Repository Tracts*, by using literature as a means of reaching the hearts and minds of the lower orders. And as the prosecution never tired of repeating in seditious-libel trials, respect for the liberty of the press demanded that it be defended as actively as possible from its greatest enemy, which was not the threat of state intervention, but a licentiousness which had betrayed the important social role which literature ought to play.

UNENLIGHTENED MEN

The respect of conservative journals such as the *British Critic* and the *Gentleman's Magazine* for the importance of the dissemination of learning ought to caution against too-easy generalizations about the ways that political contradictions of the period were mediated by ideas about literature. The *Gentleman's* and the *British Critic* were not opposed to reform, but they generally chose to concentrate on those non-threatening causes such as the reformation of manners in what they saw as a profligate age, or the reformation of those social structures which were intended to offer relief to the poor. As the situation polarized, however, the word 'reform' became increasingly linked with the so-called Jacobin thinkers,

in marked contradiction to the positions adopted by conservative authors and journals. The reformist vision of literature found its most influential critique in Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), and it would be echoed, in one way or another, in the reactions of conservative intellectuals to the social and political turmoil which marked the 1790s.⁴¹

Insisting that he was 'influenced by the inborn feelings of my nature, and not being illuminated by a single ray of this new-sprung modern light',⁴² Burke mocked the grandiose ambitions of the Enlightenment reformers whose debates he dismissed as the 'shallow speculations of the petulant, assuming, short-sighted coxcombs of philosophy' (109). English liberty was not to be identified with this spirit of innovation but, on the contrary, with 'the powerful prepossession towards antiquity, with which the minds of all our lawyers and legislators, and of all the people whom they wish to influence, have always been filled' (76). Customs were a greater guarantee of liberty than reason, which meant that literature ought not to be considered in terms of unrestrained debate, but as the repository of the wisdom of past generations. It was a 'history of the force and weakness of the human mind', an accumulation of inherited wisdom which served as both a monument to the grandeur of past generations and a potent reminder of the imperfection of the human character (292). The logical consequence of the reformers' ideas would not be the dawning of some wonderful era of enlightened liberty, but the demise of serious intellectual activity: 'No part of life would retain its acquisitions. Barbarism with regard to science and literature, unskilfulness with regard to arts and manufactures, would infallibly succeed to the want of a steady education and settled principle' (183). Unrestrained investigation led not to a newly harmonized sense of private interests but to the erosion of those unconscious affinities upon which social order was wholly predicated.

Nor was this simply because truth, the boasted prize of 'this new conquering empire of light and reason', was somehow hostile to the idea of social harmony (151). On a more fundamental level, Burke rejected the very capacity of these debates, carried on within the republic of letters, to have anything to do with truth. This autonomy, which was supposedly central to these intellectual exchanges, was, he argued, the source of the reformers' greatest problems. Fond of distinguishing themselves and lacking the sob-

ering influence of any genuine political responsibility, these men of letters would pursue innovation for its own sake, rather than as a consequence of genuine debate about important social issues. 'For, considering their speculative designs as of infinite value, and the actual arrangement of the state as of no estimation, they are at best indifferent about it. They see no merit in the good, and no fault in the vicious management of public affairs; they rather rejoice in the latter, as more propitious to revolution' (129). Burke regretted that of the list of men elected into the *Tiers Etat*, 'of any practical experience in the state, not one man was to be found. The best were only men of theory' (90). Seduced by the apparently unlimited power of reason, these advocates of the Enlightenment were misled into an irrational and dangerous confidence in 'the personal self-sufficiency' of their own ideas (182). Instead of adequately respecting the accumulated knowledge of previous generations, they prided themselves on the unparalleled wisdom which characterized their own debates. Proper respect for established customs, on the other hand, bound individuals to the greater wisdom of the community.

These 'men of theory' were not dangerous simply because they were naively optimistic or relentlessly sceptical. Instead, Burke traced a hegemonic shift in which the 'monied interest' had begun to challenge the social dominance of the landed classes (205). Inseparable from this was the rise of a new breed of writers, 'the political Men of Letters' (205). Rejecting their claim to a disinterested commitment to the general good, Burke contended that '[t]hese writers, like the propagators of all novelties, pretended to a great zeal for the poor, and the lower orders', in order to stir up popular opinion against the *ancien régime*, whose status they opposed, not because it was tyrannical, but because they felt their own aspirations impeded by it (210). By striking at the twin pillars of stable government – religious faith and a respect for the state – they had deliberately fostered an atmosphere of unrest which had resulted in their greatest triumph, the revolution itself. Unlike many conspirators though, men of letters enjoyed the prominence that was inevitably attached to the equation which they had insisted on between their own literary efforts and the public good: What was not to be done towards their great end by any direct or immediate act, might be wrought by a longer process through the medium of opinion. To command that opinion . . . they contrived to pos-